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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 PANAMA 000564

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

DEPARTMENT FOR WHA/CEN/BRIGHAM

E.O. 12958:N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PINR](#) [SOCI](#) [PM](#) [POL](#) [SPECIALIST](#)

SUBJECT: NEW PANAMA POLLS SHOW TORRIJOS WITH LARGE LEAD.

ELECTION COUNTDOWN #5: 8 WEEKS TO GO

REF: A. Panama 0465

[B](#). Panama 0417

Summary/Comment: Moving Along

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[1](#)1. (SBU) New polls from two different not necessarily reliable sources are ranking presidential candidates in the usual order. In the Assembly, legislators seeking to rejuvenate their rotten image have proposed forward-leaning reductions in their own privileges, but may lack the political will to push them through. Charges by some of racist profiling in campaign propaganda, complaints by candidates that their billboards have been vandalized, and allegations that the Presidency has used public funds to support favorite candidates, have left Panama's Electoral Prosecutor with his hands full. This campaign continues to be characterized by mudslinging and ad hominem attacks rather than by considered debate of key issues. In part this reflects a real lack of ideological differences among the four Presidential candidates. End Summary/Comment.

Poll margins vary, not rankings

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[1](#)2. (U) The rankings of the four presidential candidates in public opinion polls has not changed since mid-2003. PRD Candidate Torrijos continues to lead, followed by Solidarity Candidate Endara, with Arnulfista Aleman and Cambio Democratico Martinelli trailing well behind the other two. This week, tabloids El Siglo and La Critica, the latter Panama's best-selling daily, released the following poll results:

CANDIDATE (Party)	Siglo	Critica
MARTIN TORRIJOS (Revolutionary Democratic)	39%	48%
GUILLERMO ENDARA (Solidarity)	23%	30%
JOSE MIGUEL ALEMAN (Arnulfista)	16%	6%
RICARDO MARTINELLI (Democratic Change)	11%	6%

[1](#)3. (SBU) Educated Panamanians consider Panama's tabloids to be untrustworthy, and likewise consider their polls to be biased. Such perceptions spring from several telling facts. PSM/Sigma 2, which collects and analyzes poll data for La Critica, also does private polling for the PRD. Jaime A. Porcell, whose company collected data for El Siglo, is a longtime PRD sympathizer. Finally, El Siglo President Ebrahim Asvat is a fixture in Martin Torrijos' campaign team. (COMMENT: Both polls show Torrijos winning handily, although the Siglo poll gauges Aleman's support at roughly double the level of any other poll we have seen. Emboffs are not persuaded by poll figures, aware that 1999 public opinion polls identified Martin Torrijos as leading Mireya Moscoso until shortly before Election Day. Embassy will report further analysis of the methodology for and credibility of Panama's public opinion polls septel. END COMMENT)

Solons propose pruning perks

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[1](#)4. (SBU) Civil society pressure (intensified by front-page La Prensa investigative reporting) and pre-election calculations yielded bipartisan calls during a closed-door legislative session on March 2 to reduce legislative privileges. A draft bill to reform legislative internal by-laws would allow legislators to import only one vehicle duty-free (instead of three) during their five-year term, capping exoneration at US\$5,000, and require a three-year wait before the car could be resold. Also, legislators' two alternates ("suplentes") would no longer be entitled to

diplomatic passports unless on official mission. (COMMENT: Legislators may now import up to three cars duty-free with no maximum dollar limit and transfer them at any time to anyone. The proposed reforms would help mollify criticism of Panama's legislators; however, Emboffs are skeptical that the reforms will pass, as are many Panamanians. END COMMENT.)

Leave my ads alone

15. (U) Candidates from all political parties have bombarded the Electoral Prosecutor's Office with complaints about vandalized campaign advertisements. The previous volume of such complaints -mainly from candidates supporting Solidarity candidate Guillermo Endara- pales in comparison with this week. Arnulfista and MOLIRENA candidates complained to the media and electoral authorities that unidentified persons are destroying their billboards. Some billboards have disappeared. Vandals defaced others using black ink to cover the candidates' faces. One billboard was even shot several times with a handgun. Electoral Prosecutor Gerardo Solis announced that his office will investigate anyone accused of such crime and punish the guilty.

No rest for Electoral Prosecutor

16. (SBU) Electoral Prosecutor Gerardo Solis is getting almost as much press coverage as the four Presidential candidates. Since the campaign began, Solis has:

- called hearings to review complaints about cooked registration books in the Authentic Liberal Party (PLA), eventually eliminating PLA from the 2004 race,
- mediated a dispute between the Endara campaign and the Arnulfistas over the use of the image of deceased President and party namesake Arnulfo Arias,
- investigated vandalism of political advertisements,
- searched the Ministry of Labor to assess whether a legislative candidate was demoted for running with a non-GOP coalition party, and
- announced that he will investigate whether official funds from the Ministry of the Presidency have been used illegally to fund campaigns for Arnulfista candidate Jose Miguel Aleman and/or turncoat legislator Carlos Afu.

The President's Legal Slush Fund

17. (SBU) While Aleman denied GOP funds have entered his campaign, claiming that he has enough other money, Afu made no public comments. Minister of the Presidency Mirna Pitti claimed she had nothing to hide. Legally, Pitti has 30 calendar days to disclose use of the funds from President Moscoso's "secret allotment." (NOTE: This allotment, known in Spanish as the "partida discrecional" or "partida discreta" existed during the Endara Administration (1989-94) at a level of US\$2 million per year. President Ernesto Perez Balladares (1994-99) raised the stakes to US\$6 million, where they have since remained. Unlike other government spending, use of these funds is neither pre-authorized nor audited post-expenditure. Thus many civil society leaders have called for public release of expense records. End note)

Racial profiling in PRD Ad

18. (SBU) A TV advertisement for PRD-PP candidate Martin Torrijos offended several members of the Afro-Panamanian community. The ad, relating concerns about citizen security, portrayed a black man shadowing two elderly Latino women. Afro-Panamanian activist Alberto Barrow asserted that the ad gave the impression blacks are crime perpetrators and Latinos victims. Barrow had a heated discussion March 3 on a live TV talk show with another black PRD leader Luis Gomez, who defended the ad. The PRD convened a meeting between Barrow and ad producer Cesar Sanjur and then decided to modify the ad. The new ad has already aired, minus the suspicious-looking black man.

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